

Joyce and El by Reality_Bytes

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Summary:

In the winter of 1984, El emerges from the woods, unharmed but terrified. Now the question is, who will she live with and how will she cope with her new, "normal" life? /Two part Drabble

1. Eleven Comes Back

Author's Note:

In this story, Hopper didn't end up working for Hawkins Lab, and Bob, Max, Billy, and all the characters introduced in season 2 are not in this.

December 1984

Joyce was measuring grounds for the coffee pot when Hop through the front door. That had been another change, one Joyce had taken better than she had expected to. He had moved in with her and her boys shortly after their near death experience in the Upside Down and had begun dating, taking things slow, at Joyce's request. Hop had left early this morning before the sun had awoken, kissing a sleepy Joyce as he left, and now he was back, looking as if he had seen a ghost.

Jim took off his hat, holding it to his chest like a lifeline. "She's back," he whispered, so quiet that Joyce almost missed the words.

"What? Who?" Joyce asked, while she doctored her cup of coffee with lots of cream and a little sugar.

"That...that little girl. Eleven. She came out of the woods, covered in dirt and blood. Cal saw her when he was on his way to Phil Larson's house."

Joyce felt her heart stop for a moment and start beating again, double time. "Where is she?" She asked, taking a sip of the steaming hot liquid, while feeling that she didn't quite need it anymore.

"At the station. Why?"

Joyce put down her cup of coffee and grabs her keys and winter coat. "We have to go get her now," she said, heading to the door. Hop followed as if drawn by a magnet.

"Joyce, she's been God-knows-where for the last year. She's probably been through a lot," Hop reasoned. He knew Joyce was already

stressed enough raising two boys, even with his help, although she was reluctant to accept it. Could she handle raising someone like Eleven?

"Hop, look at me." He did. "I've been through a lot," she replied. Looking into her endless brown eyes, he saw the damage Lonnie had done to her, the anxiety and fear of raising two boys by herself, and nearly losing one of them.

"Okay," he said, and they entered his cruiser.

Jim had hardly stopped the car when Joyce bolted out and ran into the station. He hurried after her.

"Where is she?" Joyce asked Flo.

"She's in lock up," Flo replied, not looking up from the romance novel she was reading.

Hop winced. Here it comes, he thought.

"YOU LOCKED HER UP? AFTER ALL SHE'S BEEN THROUGH?" Joyce shouted. Although she was barely over five feet tall, she seemed to grow larger as she filled with rage.

Flo paled and finally glanced up. "Well, okay, I'll take you to her. Right this way," Flo managed.

"Thank you." Joyce smiled sweetly and Hop reminded himself for the millionth time since he had met Joyce not to mess with her.

They followed Flo back to the holding cell. Hop could hear Joyce muttering under her breath, catching the words " ...thought that was a good idea."

Eleven sat on the floor in the middle of the cell, her knees pulled to her chest. By some miracle, she was still wearing that pink dress and Hop's flannel, although the garments were nearly unrecognizable, having been torn and bloodied and dirtied. Her once buzzed hair had grown out into a long pixie and the nearly black curls haloed her head like a cloud. They couldn't see her face, but they could hear her whimpering and her whole body shook with sobs. Her head shot up

at the sound of their arrival. Her dark brown eyes brightened ever so slightly at the familiar faces, as if she were afraid to be happy to see them.

"Let her out, now," Joyce commanded, and Hop unlocked the door.

Realizing she was free, Eleven bolted from the cell, running towards Joyce like a bullet. Joyce bent down and held out her arms and Eleven collided with her. Joyce held her as tightly as she dared to, feeling El's bones poking through her skin.

"It's okay, sweetie, it's okay. I've got you now. Nothing's gonna hurt you, okay?" Joyce whispered, rubbing El's back and running her fingers through the knotted curls.

Joyce pulled back so she could get a good look at the child.

"Are you okay?" Joyce asked.

El nodded, but her lip began to tremble and she immediately shook her head no. Joyce held her tighter, whispering a flurry of comforting words into her ear.

Joyce pulled away again. "Eleven," she began.

"Yes?"

"I would like to take you home to live with me and with my boys, Will and Jonathan. Would you like that?" Joyce asked gently.

"Will is okay?" Eleven asked.

"He's alright. You helped save him," Joyce replied with a smile.

"And Mike?"

"He's okay too. He misses you. We can see him later today, after you get cleaned up and get some rest. Would you like that?"

For the first time since Joyce had known her, Eleven's face lit up in a smile. It was small and hesitant, but it was a smile nonetheless and Joyce thought it was a good place to start.

2. Eleven Finds a Home

Four Years Later

As Joyce had promised, El had lived with her and Hop and the boys since that day in the police station, and Joyce had done her best not to let anything hurt the little girl -who was now on the crux of adulthood - but she couldn't always protect her from the demons in El's past.

It was December of El's senior year of high school and college deadlines were fast approaching. El had managed to catch up to the boys in school, even tutoring them on occasion, as they had done for her when she had first started school. El's brilliance was no surprise to Joyce, but it was a source of pride.

Joyce arrived home from another long, thankless shift at the store, shrugging off her worn winter coat. El sat at the kitchen table, drawing, something Will had taught her over the years.

"Hi sweetie. How was school?" Joyce asked.

"Okay," El replied. Although she was as smart as any of her peers, if not smarter, El was still a teenager, prone to regressing to one-word responses.

"Good. Did you finish the Oberlin application?"

"No," El said, still not looking from her drawing.

"Why not?"

El sighed. "I'm never going to get in, so what's the point?" She threw down her colored pencil and made to storm into Jonathan's old bedroom, which had become hers when he moved away for college at NYU three years before.

"Hey, get back here - I wasn't done talking!" Joyce called, hating the harsh tone of her voice.

"I don't care, you're not my real mother!" El shouted over her

shoulder.

Joyce's heart clenched and El froze in her tracks, but she didn't turn back around. Her shoulders slumped and she moved slowly towards the bedroom. Joyce tried to follow her, but El slammed the door without touching it. Joyce knew she only used her powers when she was upset, so she knocked cautiously on the worn wooden door.

"Go away!" El called, her voice thick with tears.

"Please let me in, sweetie. I'm not mad, I just want to talk!" Joyce called back, trying to keep her voice level.

"No!" El replied.

Joyce plucked a Bobby pin from her wavy auburn hair, jimmying the lock, an old trick Karen had taught her in high school.

El was flung face down across her bed, holding her pillow tight. "I said go away," she said, but there was no fight in her voice.

"I know," Joyce whispered. She sat carefully on the end of the bed and found El's hand, clasping it in her own. To her surprise, El didn't pull away.

"Sweetheart, what made you say that?" Joyce asked carefully.

"I don't know. It was stupid. I-I didn't mean it," El whispered.

"But you must be thinking it, which means I'm not doing my job," Joyce persisted.

"Huh?"

"If you don't feel like you're my real daughter, if you think even for a second that you don't belong in this family, then I haven't done a good job as your mother."

El sat up slowly, finally looking at her mother. "No, you've been the best. It's me. I feel like I've been so much trouble for you, and I don't know how to make up for it."

"You don't have to do that. Just seeing you grow and learn and trust has meant everything to me," Joyce explained, squeezing her daughter's hand.

"Really?" El asked.

"Of course. I love you, Cricket," Joyce said, using the nickname she had given El shortly after she had brought her home. She wrapped El in a hug.

"I love you too, Mama." El hugged her back, feeling, not for the first time, that she was safe and loved. She was home.

Notes for the Chapter:

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